

THE FRESCOES OF SANTISSIMA ANNUNCIATA IN MINUTO (AMALFI)

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The church of the Santissima Annunciata in Minuto, overlooking Amalfi and the sea beyond (Fig. 1), is typical of buildings in the Amalfitan region in several respects: it occupies a stunningly dramatic setting; it is largely constructed of architectural spolia (capitals, column shafts, door frames) used in conjunction with rubble walls; and it lacks any documentary, epigraphic, or archeological evidence providing a secure date. A three-aisled basilica with six columns running down either side of the nave and with three apses at its sanctuary end, the building is of a generic type found in southern Italy from the tenth through the twelfth centuries. Although the similar three-aisled church of S. Angelo in Formis, rebuilt under Abbot Desiderius of Monte Cassino in the 1070s, is often cited—and legitimately so—as parallel in form, this in no way assures a late eleventh-century date for the church in Minuto. On the contrary, the use of light and dark intarsia around the entryways and the style of at least one of the capitals in the nave suggest an origin in the twelfth rather than the eleventh century.¹

Lack of any solid external evidence for dating applies as well to the fascinating complex of frescoes (Fig. 2) still extant in the northern bay of the three-bayed crypt, the only portion of the church's interior decoration to survive.² Originally all three

walls of this bay, and its vault, were frescoed; of these, the eastern wall has lost virtually all of its painting, while the other walls and vault preserve most of the original fresco. Lower portions of the western wall have suffered significantly, and a number of heads on the north and west walls have been cut out of the plaster and carried off (as souvenirs?). The colors have faded a great deal, and there has been minor retouching in places. Nevertheless, the frescoes form an ensemble whose unified stylistic character and iconographic repertoire remain amply in evidence. As the best preserved of the few early medieval fresco cycles from the Amalfitan area, they are among the most important witnesses to the character of the artistic production of that region in the Middle Ages. It is to the date and general iconographic and stylistic affiliations of these frescoes that this note is confined.

The ensemble is composed of a number of stylistically unified but iconographically independent units. In the vault above the northern wall appears Christ Pantokrator (Fig. 3). He is flanked in the eastern and western vault compartments by John the Baptist (whose scroll reads: [Ecce] QUI TOLLIT PECCATA MUN[di]) and John the Evangelist (VERBUM ERAT. . .). These two are accompanied in the other parts of their vaults by Daniel (CUM VENERIT SANCTUS SAN[ctorum]) and David (DNS DNO MEO). Each of the three walls originally featured in its main lunette section a scene from Christ's infancy: the Annunciation on the

¹M. Camera, *Memorie storico-diplomatiche dell'antica città e ducato di Amalfi*, II (Salerno, 1881), 255–56; H. Schulz, *Denkmäler der Kunst des Unteritaliens*, I (Dresden, 1860), 265 f; A. Schiavo, *Monumenti della costa di Amalfi* (Rome, 1941), 137 ff; A. Venditti, *Architettura bizantina dell'Italia meridionale*, II (Naples, 1967), 656 f.

²D. Salazaro, *Studi sui monumenti dell'Italia meridionale*, I (Naples, 1871), 30 ff; E. Bertaux, *L'art dans l'Italie méridionale* (Paris, 1904), 281 ff; P. Toesca, *Storia dell'arte italiana. Il medioevo*, II (Turin, 1927), 939; Schiavo, *Monumenti*, 138; J. Wettstein,

Sant'Angelo in Formis et la peinture médiévale en Campanie (Geneva, 1960), 97; O. Demus, *Romanesque Mural Painting* (New York, 1970), 80; C. D'Amato, "Gli affreschi di S. Maria di Minuta in Scala," *RACr* 49 (1973), 111–20.

south wall has virtually disappeared, but the elaborate Nativity (. . . PRESEPIO POSITUM. . .) on the north wall and the Visitation on the west remain (Figs. 4 and 5). These were separated by a narrow inscription band (almost entirely illegible) from other representations on the lower portions of the walls: on the north two scenes from the life of St. Nicholas (Figs. 6 and 7) and on the west and east two full-length figures of saints. Those on the west wall are relatively well preserved: George (inscribed) and, most probably, Nicholas. The latter (Fig. 8) is shown with archbishop's regalia: pallium, miter, and crozier. Significantly, the crozier's ivory head is of the curled serpent form known from surviving examples and attributed to a south Italian or Sicilian atelier ca. 1200.³ The lowest parts of the walls at Minuto display simulated marble panels.

Scenes of Christ's Incarnation are a logical choice for a fresco cycle in the crypt of a church dedicated to the Virgin, but more unusual is the combination of the Incarnation episodes with scenes from the life of St. Nicholas. The presence of these pictures of the Nicholas story suggests that the crypt chapel may have been dedicated to this saint. Considering Nicholas' popularity in the Amalfitan region, such a dedication would not be surprising. Many churches in the duchy were dedicated to him, and the only other well-preserved medieval fresco decoration from the area—at S. Maria de Olearia—contains a Nicholas cycle dating to approximately 1100.⁴ As the patron saint of seafaring men, Nicholas had a particularly meaningful place in the maritime community of Amalfi, especially after the arrival of his relics in Bari in 1087.

The iconographic repertoire at Minuto is particularly interesting because it clearly incorporates elements of both Western and Byzantine origin. Among the latter, most conspicuous is the Pantokrator in the vault who holds the closed book in his outstretched left hand as he extends his right in a gesture of benediction. The bust-length Pantokrator, or All-Ruler, is a characteristically Byzantine type, which finds its most exalted place in the domes and/or apses of the great Middle Byzantine church decorative programs. Occasionally the im-

age may be found in the section of a vault, as at Minuto. The great Sicilian mosaic programs of the twelfth century at Cefalù, the Palatine Chapel at Palermo, and Monreale all feature the Pantokrator in the conch of the apse.⁵ Much more prevalent in the West during the eleventh and twelfth centuries was the *Maiestas Domini*, where a full-length enthroned Christ was depicted in the company of the Evangelist symbols, archangels, or saints. The classic south Italian example is the eleventh-century fresco in the apse of S. Angelo in Formis near Capua.⁶ The Minuto Pantokrator corresponds most closely to the version in the apse at Monreale where Christ is also shown extending both arms. At Monreale, however, as in virtually all the Byzantine Pantokrators with outstretched arms, Christ carries an open book in his left hand. Minuto appears unique in showing him with a closed book, a detail used for other Byzantine variants of the Pantokrator. The Minuto artist might have adopted the closed book in order to accommodate the figure to its triangular setting.

While the iconography of the Visitation is too generic to allow for detailed analysis, there is little doubt that the Nativity at Minuto derives from Byzantine sources. The Virgin reclines at the center of the composition. The Virgin, the Christ child, the ox, and the ass are enclosed within the contours of the mountainous setting. To the right of the mountain Joseph sits and contemplates the child's first bath, administered by three midwives. To the left an angel announces the event to two shepherds. A star appears at the apex of the scene, above the mountain, where it is adored by flanking choirs of angels. There is considerable variety among post-iconoclastic Byzantine images of the Nativity. Nevertheless, one commonly finds in the Byzantine versions not only the mountain/cave setting but also the combination of the annunciation to the shepherds, the child's first bath, and the angels adoring the star, as seen at Minuto. Most of these elements can already be seen in the Nativity from the Menologion of Basil II (ca. 1000), albeit in reduced form; in the eleventh-century fresco from Hosios Lukas; and in the Vatican Gospels, Urb. gr. 2, dated 1122 (where the Magi are also

³See, e.g., the crozier top in the Abegg-Stiftung in Bern: H. Fillitz, *Zwei Elfenbeinplatten aus Südtalien* (Bern, 1967), pl. 111.

⁴H. Belting, *Studien zur beneventanischen Malerei* (Wiesbaden, 1968), 144.

⁵O. Demus, *The Mosaics of Norman Sicily* (London, 1950), pls. 1, 10B, 61. For the theme in the context of Byzantine church decoration see idem, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration* (Boston, 1955), 17–22, 52–60 (Pantokrators in the vaults of Hosios Lukas are shown in figs. 26, 27).

⁶O. Morisani, *Gli affreschi di S. Angelo in Formis* (Cava dei Tirreni, 1962), figs. 12, 13.

included in the scene).⁷ The Western Nativity type relates to a completely different and more simplified tradition.⁸ One unusual element at Minuto is the inclusion of three women in the bathing scene; normally only two midwives are shown washing the child. This element may have been introduced by the Minuto artist.

Narrative scenes illustrating the life of St. Nicholas are rare among surviving medieval monuments, either Byzantine or Western. The two scenes at Minuto depict the story of the abduction into servitude of a young Christian boy (Adeodatus in the Latin texts, Basil in the Greek versions) by a pagan king, for whom the child is forced to serve as cupbearer. Through the intervention of St. Nicholas he is miraculously reunited with his parents a year after his kidnaping. The first episode at Minuto shows the king at the far left, seated at a sigma-shaped table in the company of two courtiers. The young boy, clad in short tunic and with a towel carried over his shoulder, offers a cup to the king. The exotic decoration of the tablecloth and the pseudo-Kufic decorative banding on the cup suggest the "pagan" milieu in which the boy was held captive. The second scene features the imposing figure of St. Nicholas, with vestments and crozier identical to those of the figure accompanying St. George on the west wall. The saint is shown grasping the young boy by the hair as he returns him to the outstretched arms of his parents. At the right, in front of a colonnaded backdrop, three tonsured figures witness the scene seated at a rectangular table covered with a plain white cloth. There is little doubt that the rectangular table is intended to establish a contrast with the lunette-shaped table of the first episode, highlighting the difference between pagan and Christian settings.⁹

Nancy Ševčenko, in her valuable study on the life of St. Nicholas in Byzantine art, has gathered together the few surviving images of the Basil

story from the Byzantine sphere.¹⁰ In fact, she can list only six examples from Byzantium and its cultural dependencies. While the Minuto scenes relate to certain of these Byzantine versions in general ways, further examination reveals that the Nicholas frescoes derive from a Western iconographic tradition. This is most clearly demonstrated by two details from the second scene. The three tonsured men who sit at the table watching the boy's return to his parents are alluded to in Latin texts of the legend but are absent from the Greek versions. Moreover, while they are never found in Byzantine representations of the episode, the three figures may be precisely paralleled in the St. Nicholas altarpiece from the church of S. Verrano in Peccioli (near Pisa), painted by a Tuscan master in the second half of the thirteenth century.¹¹ The Peccioli panel, like the Minuto fresco, depicts the curious feature of St. Nicholas holding the boy by the hair as he presents him to his parents. This iconography also derives from the Latin text tradition for the miracle where it is stated, "et eum per capillos verticis capitis sui tenens."¹² As far as I know, the Minuto version represents the earliest known example of this iconography. Yet other features of the scene—the cup and towel held by the boy and the exuberant greeting he receives from his parents—corroborate the Western character of the Nicholas scenes.

Despite a recent article that unsuccessfully attempts to place the frescoes in the ninth or tenth century, comparing them with the paintings of Castelseprio(!),¹³ legitimate controversy regarding their date concerns a time frame ranging only from the beginning to the end of the twelfth century. While such a discrepancy in dating might seem a subject suitable for only the most specialized of interests, in fact the question of *exactly* when in the twelfth century the frescoes were painted is important for understanding their affiliations and for evaluating their place in the history of medieval painting in Italy.

Current scholarly opinion, dating the frescoes generally in the latter half of the twelfth century, describes them as provincial offshoots of the great Norman mosaic productions of twelfth-century Si-

⁷The Menologion and Hosios Lukas versions are conveniently illustrated in G. Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, I (Greenwich, Conn., 1971), figs. 157, 158. For Urb. gr. 2 see G. Stornajolo, *Le miniature delle Omelie di Giacomo monaco (Vat. gr. 1162) e dell'evangelario greco Urbinate (Vat. Urb. gr. 2)* (Rome, 1910), pl. 20.

⁸See the numerous examples illustrated in Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, I, figs. 160 ff.

⁹For details of the Latin texts and legends see K. Meisen, *Nikolauskult und Nikolausbrauch im Abendlande* (Düsseldorf, 1931). The Greek texts are contained in G. Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1913, 1917).

¹⁰*The Life of St. Nicholas in Byzantine Art* (Turin, 1983).

¹¹G. Kaftal, *Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting* (Florence, 1957), fig. 864; also cited for other details by N. Ševčenko, *St. Nicholas*, 145 note 5. The three men are sometimes identified as pilgrims in the Latin texts. See Meisen, *Nikolauskult*, 256 ff.

¹²Ševčenko, *St. Nicholas*, 146 note 6.

¹³D'Amato, "Gli affreschi," 118.

cily.¹⁴ Indeed, significant relationships may be discerned between the Minuto paintings and the Sicilian decorations, particularly the mosaics of the 1180s in the great church at Monreale. One can point to factors as broad as the general type of the Pantokrator found in both places or as specific as the peculiar type of vessel held by the servant boy in the first of the Nicholas scenes at Minuto and in the Miracle at Cana scene at Monreale.¹⁵ The architectural arrangement of the Visitation fresco, with its central apselike niche supported on spiral columns and flanked by symmetrically disposed openings is found in several of the Monreale mosaics, perhaps the closest parallel being the background in the now-destroyed Dream of Joseph, known from Gravina's engraving.¹⁶ Specific drapery devices in the Minuto paintings are related to Monreale. For example, the method of rendering the portion of the tunic that covers John the Baptist's right leg in Minuto, where a large swirling oval appears at the thigh interconnected by a series of swirling lines with a second ovoid shape at the knee, is found in a more robust version in the corresponding portion of St. Anthony's drapery in the Monreale apse.¹⁷ The fluttering line of cloth that outlines the back of the leg of the midwife at the left of the basin in the Nativity at Minuto is a common feature among the Monreale mosaics; for example, it is found outlining St. Peter's back in the Washing of the Feet.¹⁸

Such parallels, some more general than others, but some quite specific in nature, can be multiplied many times over. Interestingly, a number of the features that appear in both places are not unchanged in the Minuto rendition. For example, the spatial setting of the Visitation, while close to Monreale, is nonetheless marked by a significant diminution in the space-generating qualities of the architecture. Elements are much more flattened out on the surface, and the "apse" tends to lose its concave definition. The same is true for the little cityscapes in the Minuto Nicholas scenes: their walls fail to develop in depth the way those at Monreale do. Those interconnected drapery swirls seen on the figure of John the Baptist have gone

through a similar transformation: at Monreale the parallel feature remains tactile and suggestive of relatively three-dimensional drapery folds, whereas in the fresco they have become little more than lines appearing flat on the surface. It may well be that in this regard the style of the Minuto frescoes has been somewhat influenced by Romanesque tendencies rather than maintaining the more purely Byzantine approach of the Sicilian mosaicists. Indeed, particularly in the Nicholas scenes that derive from Western iconographic types, the Minuto artists seem to deviate from the canons of Byzantine form.

Two other Italian monuments stand out as significantly related to the frescoes of Santissima Annunciata, and both are seen as having been created in the wake of the Monreale mosaics. On the interior lunette over the central doorway of the Duomo at Salerno is a mosaic depicting St. Matthew, to whom the cathedral was dedicated after the translation of his relics in 954.¹⁹ The figure appears drawn from the same model as the Minuto Pantokrator. Their gestures and drapery types are virtually identical. Moreover, in rendering the richly built-up drapery at the left shoulder or the bulge of cloth at the stomach, mosaicist and fresco painter are closely allied. It is now universally accepted that the frescoes of the narthex at S. Angelo in Formis date toward the end of the twelfth century. In the well-preserved figure of an angel who supports the bust of the Virgin over the central doorway the same build-up of drapery is again in evidence, as is the rippling drapery border lining the angel's left leg, a feature already seen at both Minuto and Monreale.²⁰ Admittedly, the elegant S. Angelo in Formis angel is closer in spirit to the style of Byzantium than the Minuto frescoes, undoubtedly painted by Western masters a further step removed from the pace-setting art of the Byzantine sphere.

While all of this might serve to specify the quality of the relationship between the Monreale mosaics and the Minuto frescoes—it can be taken for granted that Minuto cannot predate Monreale—it leaves intact the notion that the latter might well be simply a provincial derivative of the former. In fact, I think that this is a mistaken notion fostered

¹⁴Wettstein, *Sant'Angelo in Formis*, 97; Demus, *Romanesque Mural Painting*, 80. A date in the late 11th or early 12th century was proposed by Schiavo, *Monumenti*, 138.

¹⁵Demus, *Mosaics*, fig. 66a; E. Kitzinger, *The Mosaics of Monreale* (Palermo, 1960), pl. III (rear of book).

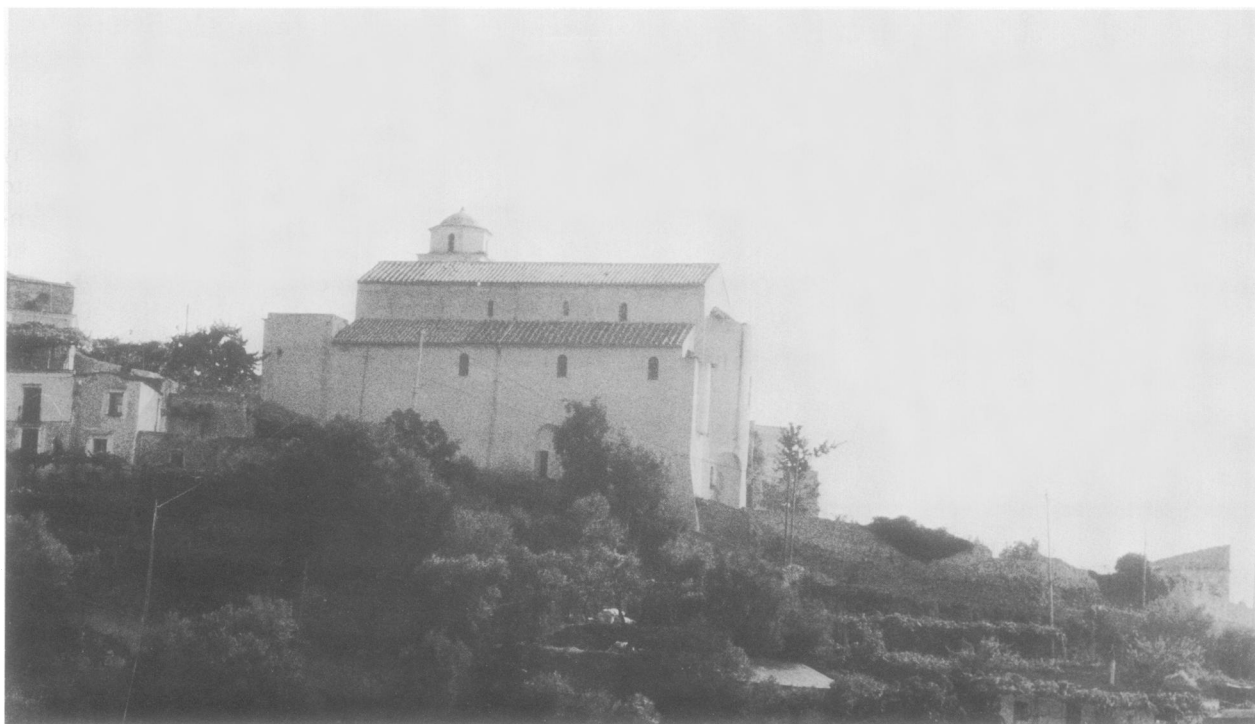
¹⁶Demus, *Mosaics*, 65a; Kitzinger, *Monreale*, pl. II (rear of book).

¹⁷Demus, *Mosaics*, fig. 64.

¹⁸Demus, *Mosaics*, fig. 69a; Kitzinger, *Monreale*, fig. 57.

¹⁹See the color illustration in G. Cavallo et al., *I Bizantini in Italia* (Milan, 1982), fig. 400, where it is tellingly juxtaposed with the Minuto Pantokrator. Demus, *Mosaics*, 452, dates the Salerno mosaic to the 1190s.

²⁰For the S. Angelo in Formis angel see Kitzinger, *Monreale*, 78 and Morisani, *S. Angelo in Formis*, figs. 5, 7.



1. Minuto, Santissima Annunciata, general view of the church from the southeast

by lack of comprehensive publication of the Minuto frescoes. The Visitation, for example, has never been reproduced, even though it provides one of the most important clues to the dating. The elongated proportions of the various figures, the exaggerated patterns formed when their draperies mimic the anatomy beneath (such as the breasts of the attendant to the left), and, most especially, the agitated folds of (Elizabeth's?) mantle as she leans forward to greet the Virgin, mark this work as belonging to the "dynamic style" that developed in Byzantium in the late Comnenian period and had a significant impact throughout the Latin West, a style that Ernst Kitzinger has studied on more than one occasion.²¹ Although Monreale is one of the primary monuments of the style, the stage of "dy-

namism" in evidence in the Minuto Visitation seems to relate to a moment further along in the style's history. Nowhere in the Monreale mosaics do the characteristic drapery folds already mentioned undulate as they do at Minuto, looking actively serpentine in form. At Monreale the agitated hemline folds are present, but the upper portions of these folds are never subject to the bending seen at Minuto. Exactly such a zigzag device does appear, however, in a group of Byzantine or Byzantine-derived works firmly dated or attributed to the 1190s. Most notable among these are the frescoes of Kurbinovo in Macedonia, Lagoudera in Cyprus, and the great Annunciation icon of St. Catherine's on Mount Sinai.²² The detail from the Minuto Visitation is much closer to these representatives of the last "mannerist" stage of the style than to the relatively more subdued phase of Monreale. This is supported by a number of specific comparisons between Minuto and the Cypriot and Macedonian frescoes. Not only is the type and execution of the Minuto Pantokrator remarkably close

²¹ On the dynamic style see, among others, Demus, *Mosaics*, 418 ff; idem, *Byzantine Art and the West* (New York, 1970), 150 ff; Kitzinger, *Monreale*, esp. 75 ff; idem, "The Byzantine Contribution to Western Art of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries," *DOP* 20 (1966), esp. 361 ff (rpr. in E. Kitzinger, *The Art of Byzantium and the Medieval West* [Bloomington, 1976], 357–78); idem, "Norman Sicily as a Source of Byzantine Influence on Western Art in the Twelfth Century," in *Byzantine Art, a European Art. Lectures* (Athens, 1966), 121 ff; K. Weitzmann, "Eine spät-komnenische Verkündigungssikone des Sinai und die zweite byzantinische Welle des zwölften Jahrhunderts," in *Festschrift für Herbert von Einem* (Berlin, 1965), 385 ff.

²² For Kurbinovo and Lagoudera see now L. Hadermann-Misguich, *Kurbinovo, les fresques de Saint-Georges et la peinture byzantine du XIIe siècle*, 2 vols. (Brussels, 1975); for the Sinai icon see Weitzmann, "Verkündigungssikone," passim.



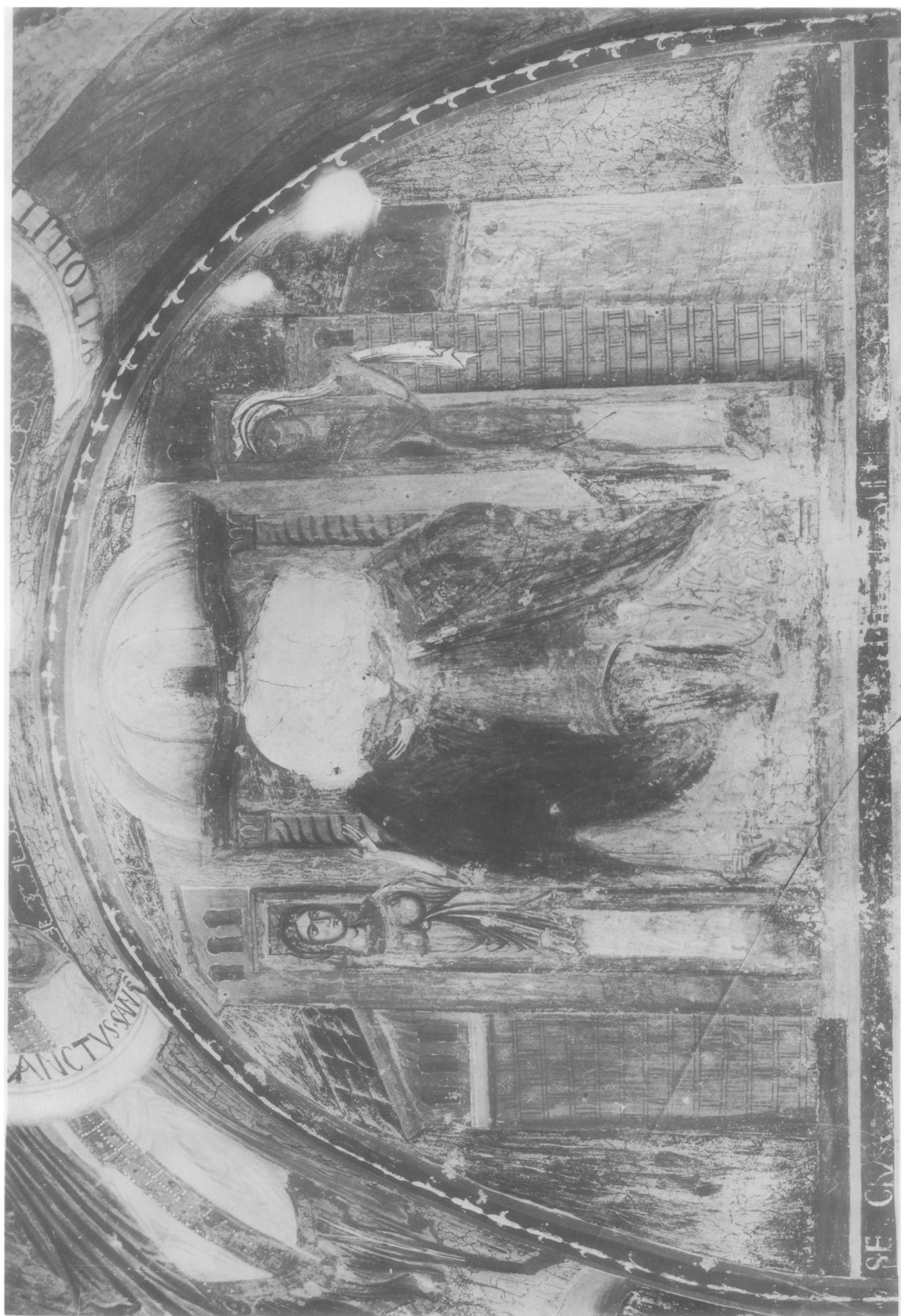
2. View of the crypt chapel with frescoes, looking northwest (photos 2-8: Soprintendenza alle Gallerie, Naples)



3. Pantokrator (vault)



4. Nativity (north wall)



5. Visitation (west wall)



6. St. Nicholas, Miracle of Adeodatus, episode 1 (north wall)



7. St. Nicholas, Miracle of Adeodatus, episode 2 (north wall)



8. St. Nicholas (west wall)

to its counterparts in both these cycles, but the specific lyrelike lines used to delineate facial modeling in various figures in the Italian frescoes (e.g., Fig. 8) is found time and again at Kurbinovo.²³ The iconography of the Nativity at Kurbinovo and Minuto is very similar, but even more telling is the detail of the rendering of the old shepherd being informed of the event by an angel. The very high forehead with its several deep furrows and the deep-set eyes, both indicative of the profundity of this common man's wisdom and experience and of the significance of the event at hand, are virtually identical in the two works.²⁴

Again, specific comparisons might be multiplied, but the point seems clear: the Minuto frescoes do not grow directly out of the style of Monreale but seem to be more closely affiliated with the

succeeding phase in the evolution of the "dynamic style" represented by the works of the 1190s. This not only suggests a date for the Minuto frescoes ca. 1200 but also indicates that evolving Byzantine style in the monumental arts continued to have immediate impact in the south Italian realm. Greek painters could hardly have been responsible for the actual execution of the Minuto frescoes, as they were for many of the Sicilian mosaics. The presence of various Western iconographic and stylistic traits and Latin inscriptions suggests that we deal here with Italian masters emulating up-to-date Byzantine approaches. Sicily and southern Italy had been united in a Norman kingdom whose artistic character was determined to a great extent by Byzantine inspiration. If the Minuto frescoes do date to ca. 1200, they demonstrate that with the advent of the Normans' infant Hohenstaufen successor, Frederick II, the lines of inspiration remained uninterrupted.

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²³For the Christ types see Hadermann-Misguich, *Kurbinovo*, figs. 165–66. The lyrelike lines are evident in the faces shown in figs. 131 and 170, among others.

²⁴Hadermann-Misguich, *Kurbinovo*, fig. 47.